

Presidential Honors Society: STRIVING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By Whitney Sperrazza

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” When Anne Frank wrote those words, she was writing about service performed for the good of others, service that helps change the world one individual at a time. That’s the type of service members of the University at Albany’s Presidential Honors Society (PHS) perform every day.

Since its founding, PHS has made many contributions to the UAlbany community and its neighbors. In 1991, students Brian Kerr and Kevin McIntyre, with the support of Professor Sung Bok Kim, envisioned the society as a means of bringing the brightest students at the University together to make a commitment to community service. Initially, 15 students performed 500 hours of community service a year through PHS. Today, more than 200 students give 8,000 hours annually of their time and talent to such national charities as the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association; and to local organizations, including St. Peter’s Hospital, the Regional Food Bank and Capital City Rescue Mission. Last year, PHS reached out on a global scale, collecting more than 1,800 books to assist with literacy efforts in Africa.

While all of these initiatives are central to the PHS mission, society members feel that serving their fellow students is among their most important objectives. One of the society’s major initiatives, Campus Clean-Up Day, was begun in 1996. Today, many UAlbany students enjoy participating in that tradition.

Recently, PHS adopted Albany Boy Scout Troop 413, “setting up study sessions and social and ‘shadowing’ events, both downtown and on campus,” explains physics major Nicholas Fahrenkopf, the society’s vice president. “Some members have helped with camping and other activities related to earn-

ing badges.” The scouts and PHS joined forces on a neighborhood cleanup project in Albany’s South End last fall. “We also recently assisted the scouts with their fundraising drive, selling popcorn,” Fahrenkopf adds.

The PHS-Troop 413 partnership – the dream of PHS alumnus and troop leader Kevin Grossman – “went way beyond” his expectations. “The students truly have made a difference. I’m really looking forward to continuing this relationship through the spring semester,” Grossman says.

Others also appreciate the outstanding work PHS students do each year. The organization has won several President’s Awards from the University, and individual members are also honored for their contributions. Says PHS adviser and Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Education Dan Smith: “This really is an outstanding group of individuals. They raise the bar every year, and I’m very proud to be working with them.”

Society members are looking for new opportunities for service “so we can take our group to that next level of excellence and service,” notes Fahrenkopf. To that end, “we’re trying to establish some really strong connections with our former members.”

While alumni outreach is one of its biggest goals for 2008 and beyond, the group will not stop there. This spring, PHS is kicking off a “Give It Up Campaign” to increase on-campus awareness of hunger and poverty in Third World countries. And members will continue their involvement with Boy Scout Troop 413.

[PHS President Whitney Sperrazza will graduate later this year. Presidential Honors Society alumni who would like to help the group’s members make a difference, on and off campus, may contact her at wsperrazza@gmail.com.]

